The Seductive Nature of Power

Today’s readings could not present a more striking contrast between God’s ways and ours. God’s noble purposes for us are revealed in the figure of the patient suffering servant (Is), through the gentleness and empathy of Jesus for with our weaknesses (Heb), and through the startlingly disarming presence of a humble and crucified servant described in the Gospel of Mark.

Conventional human wisdom would contemptuously dismiss all this as God’s utter foolishness. But for St. Paul, they reveal the true depth of God’s inscrutable wisdom and greatness (1Cor 1:18).

By way of contrast, human history is full of stories of charismatic leaders and their supporters resorting to the crude use of raw power, violence. These cruelties impose their wills to implement their own political or social agenda. The more sophisticated in today’s world use subtle coercion. They seek to manipulate public opinion, and to corrupt the political process in order to achieve their ambitions to dominate others.

Many of these are deeply convinced that what they do is right and that their intentions are noble. They presume that what they do is good not only for themselves but also for their communities and society in general. The successful ones among them are often rewarded with honour and recognition. They are feted as visionaries and leaders, worthy of respect and emulation.

Human ambition for fame, recognition, and power is reflected in the disciples’ lobbying for prominent positions. Like them we could just as easily be seduced by the trappings of power, respect, wealth, and celebrity. The single-minded pursuit of these goals drives us to sacrifice the best side our humanity intent on honour, truthfulness, compassion, altruism, and love. Even worse, we may be prepared to sacrifice those dearest to them on the altar of our ambitions. As a result, we can cause divisions, suffering, and misery for those around us and beyond.

We may reason that power could be used for the good of our community and for the wider world. It is certainly a deliciously tempting proposition. But the hard truth is that power is a potent and intoxicating drug that slowly but surely corrupts those who wield it even for what they imagine to be noble purposes. That is why we must take very seriously the reality of sin in the world and sinfulness in our lives.

Jesus’ dire warning to his disciples against the seductive glitter of worldly greatness and power is an evergreen reminder to all, but particularly to those who hold offices of authority in the Church. All need to hear this repeatedly until our hearts are saturated with the message he himself lived and embodied. The temptation stories encapsulate Jesus’ total and absolute rejection of power as an instrument for His saving work.
In Jesus, God’s way is made clear—respect for all, non-coercion, non-violence, and the invitation to love. It led Jesus to suffering, rejection, and finally the cross. But in all this, God is being revealed as merciful and all-forgiving Love. The disciples’ way must therefore mirror God’s way.

Bernard Teo C.Ss.R
© Redemptorists 2012

Antiphons for the Mass

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON (or a hymn) To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps. 32)
Antiphon: Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.
RESPONSE: Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.
Lector: The word of the Lord is faithful and all his works to be trusted. The Lord loves justice and right and fills the earth with his love. R.
Lector: The Lord looks on those who revere him, on those who hope in his love, to rescue their souls from death, to keep them alive in famine. R.
Lector: Our soul is waiting for the Lord. The Lord is our help and our shield. May your love be upon us, O Lord, as we place all our hope in you. R.
GOSPEL ACCLAMATION Alleluia, alleluia! The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for all. Alleluia!

COMMUNION ANTIPHON (1) or (2) (or a hymn)
(1) Behold, the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, who hope in his merciful love, to rescue their souls from death, to keep them alive in famine. R.
(2) The Son of Man has come to give his life as a ransom for many.

Today’s Readings Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45
Next Week (30th Sunday of Year B) Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 125; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52